

## Reflections on equality, diversity and gender at the end of a media studies headship

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## **Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Gender at the End of a Media Studies Headship**

I recently received an email, in my capacity as an 'academic manager', from an organization promoting 'University Business'. One of many, the opening salvo of this particular example runs:

Universities everywhere are changing. There's a shift towards commercialization in the industry, which means you need to make changes now to stay ahead of the curve.

The text is accompanied by an image of a young white woman wearing a summer dress, and looking pleased and surprised at something she is gazing down at. The object of her delight is unseen, and the background blurred. I'm not sure quite what connection I am supposed to make – is she a student? A lecturer? An administrator? What she clearly *is*, however, is the ideal neo-liberal subject – individual, young, and context-less – who is to benefit from these changes that 'I' am to make. Equally clearly, 'I' am not her. Who, then, am I?

In 2008, following the appointment of a new vice-chancellor, my university set about restructuring – from a faculty-based pyramid organization to a flat, multi-School structure. It was announced as a move to greater local autonomy, but was in fact a move to centralize control. The new Schools would have budgetary as well as staffing, research and teaching responsibility. They would be subject to internal competition for funds and would have to (or that was what was said) remain 'in surplus'. I was finishing my term as Head of Department, and found

that in the new structure Media would become a School, adding only the faculty members of a very small subject group to the department I already headed. So I applied for the Head of School position, reasoning that, though a managerial post, it was one that would enable me to retain my subject identity. It would also, crucially, give me a say in how things would develop in the new structure.

In late 2008 I was interviewed, and appointed – the first of the 13 new Heads to be confirmed. And I waited to see who my fellow Heads would be. At the end of the process, I was the only woman to be appointed. When I questioned the appointment processes that had led to this state of affairs, I was met with both incomprehension and hostility. Surely I wasn't questioning the fairness of the processes: they had been conducted with the aid of corporate head-hunters and had selected candidates a) from those who applied (and women tended not to apply), and b) according to 'merit' (self-evidently a neutral term)<sup>1</sup>.

This is, perhaps, an extreme situation, but I think it's symptomatic, as is the fact that my successor is a man who works on digital media and technology. In what follows I want to reflect on: 1) what this (and what followed) says about institutional perceptions of the subject area; 2) how that relates to disciplinary self-perceptions; and 3) the specific management challenges it posed.

### **Institutional perceptions**

In one sense this situation was not new. The five Faculty Deans under the previous structure had all been men, and of the University's six-strong Executive

group, the only woman was in charge of Teaching, Learning and Student Support. And the Vice Chancellor may well have been right: despite thirty years of feminism, women, probably, did not apply<sup>2</sup>.

The institution of the academic discipline has, of course, always been tied to the masculinization of knowledge, just as the claims to independence and analytical rigour of those disciplines have been tied to a particular notion of the ideal subject as white, Western, and male. If we look, for example, at the early accounts of the development of cultural studies, even Stuart Hall constructs a disciplinary narrative figured in terms of territorial struggle and a journey to masculinity. Cultural studies, he writes, has ceased to be 'a dependent intellectual colony'; it is beginning 'to desert its "handmaiden" role and chart a more independent, ambitious, properly integrated space of its own' (1980: 22, 26)<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, what marked the growing maturity of cultural studies as a discipline was an increasing masculinisation.

When, therefore, the British media launched sustained attacks on media studies throughout the 1990s, they emphasized that it was not a 'real' discipline. In so doing they were claiming both that it did not have the cultural capital necessary for the production of *appropriate* graduates, *and* that it was insufficiently masculine (Barker 2001, Thornham and O'Sullivan 2004). It was 'soft', lacking rigour, unintellectual, with all the qualities of the popular culture it studied. In 2008 my university was focused on being 'research intensive'. Thus not only did it boast a Nobel prize winner in science, but it emphasized the disciplinary rigour

of its humanities and social sciences. In such circumstances, a School of Media represented one of the very few possible candidates for a female Head of School.

In some ways, however, I think the situation *was* new. The 2008 restructuring represented my university's (rather belated) embrace of academic capitalism and the commodification of higher education. Of the thirteen new appointments, ten came from outside the University. Their (Our) job, it turned out, was to be to put the University on a new competitive footing, to make a financial surplus for our Schools, to weed out 'non-performers', to increase student numbers, especially from overseas (and hence boost income), and to compete successfully both externally and internally for funding. It was a move designed to produce a 'corporatised' university fit to compete in the new 'knowledge economy', but it was one that also ensured, as Margaret Thornton has argued, the university's 're-masculinisation' after the intellectual, political and cultural challenges of the 80s and 90s. The fear that the academy was becoming 'feminised' has been staunched, she writes, and the masculinity of the ideal academic injected with new life'. This rejuvenated 'ideal academic' (an imaginary figure perhaps, but one which we internalize) she terms 'Benchmark Man', the 'high-flying technopreneur' (2013: 138). His opposite, on whom he also depends (she is part of the reproductive economy, in which knowledge is *given*, in contrast to the productive economy in which it is bought and sold) is 'the less-than-ideal academic - the humanities or social science teacher with large classes, who is more likely to be both casualised and feminized' (ibid.: 133, 127).

In this new situation, media studies – interdisciplinary, unfashionably left-wing,

still popular with students but neither a 'real discipline' nor tied in productively to the industries of which it offers a critique – is of course 'less-than-ideal'. It can be headed by a woman because it can be allowed to fail. In the event that it doesn't, it can be tolerated, along with Social Work, Gender Studies (now absorbed into Sociology) and 'Continuing Education', as part of the University's gesture towards inclusiveness - like its Equal Opportunities policies, about which Sara Ahmed (2007) has written - and perhaps also as a nod towards its more radical past.

### **Disciplinary self-perceptions**

Faced with the charge of disciplinary inadequacy, media studies academics and teachers have traditionally had recourse to three strategies. One, Hall's strategy in 1980, is to insist on the claim to disciplinary rigour and the sort of masculine territorial ambition that would render media studies a 'real' discipline. A second, evident in John Corner's characterization of the subject in 1991, is to argue that there are *two* sorts of media studies: what Charlotte Brunsdon (1997) called the 'girlzone' of the 'popular culture project', and the far more masculine '*public knowledge* project' (Corner 1991: 268). Here, disciplinary seriousness, and masculinity, is claimed via the object of study: public, not private, concerned with knowledge not 'taste and pleasure'. A third strategy, increasingly evident in the UK in the 1990s and early 2000s, was to seek alliances with the industries that have formed its object of study. Here, the 'media studies subject' is masculinised via the identification with professionalism and skills rather than academic rigour. Media studies, that is, may not be a 'real' discipline, but it is engaged in 'real' training.

Things have changed since I wrote about this in 2004, however, and I want to argue that the academic capitalism and the commodification of higher education that we have experienced have aided the masculinization of the media studies subject, in three ways. First, the move towards 'league tables', competition, and what Roger Burrows (2012) calls 'quantified control' - has worked to reify disciplinary boundaries, rendering the claim to be a 'real' discipline one that can now be more legitimately made. In the process, interdisciplinary work has been marginalized, and gender issues have become a matter of embodied disadvantage to be taken into account (due allowance made during the assessment process for pregnancy and maternity leave), not structural inequality – time spent on the 'feminised' tasks of student support, teaching, administrative 'service'.

Second, there has been the increasing demand – in the UK written in for the first time to the 2014 research assessment exercise - that academic research have *demonstrable* (ie verifiable and measurable) impact beyond the academy. In fact, media studies in 2014 proved surprisingly good at demonstrating such impact, but primarily in two – I would argue - problematic ways. The first is through a 'public knowledge project' that has become increasingly aligned with existing public institutions (Ofcom, the BBC, the British Library, government bodies). The second is via media practice work, now no longer seen simply as 'training' but as producing outputs that, if clearly 'authored' (ie. individualized), and if broadcast or otherwise widely distributed, can have the required 'impact'.

It is the third aspect of this masculinisation that I am most concerned about, however, because it is the one that we ourselves most buy into. This is the embrace of the 'digital'. 'Digital media' sounds so much 'harder' than media studies. Its rhetoric makes claims to the technical, to *knowing* about 'hard' subjects – coding, software, 'big' data, technological infrastructures – that serve to distance it from those feminised areas of 'taste and pleasure' that Corner talked about (I recently read a very articulate and politically engaged book about 'digital transformations' in which only 13 of the 155 bibliographic references referred to works by women, and gender did not feature in the index at all). My own School now has a 'Digital Humanities Lab', and though the title was strategically chosen, and the focus is critical and creative, it has undoubtedly led to an institutional perception that, though it has its soft spots, this is a harder, more masculine field than had previously been thought. A typical presentation hosted by the lab, for example, talks of 'new CompPsy techniques in behaviour monitoring platforms ... emotional analytic platforms that can mine the affective dimensions of learning', and of 'exploring cognitive neuroscience insights' that are 'utilized in emerging cognitive computing and artificial intelligence systems'. The intention here may be critical, but the discourse deployed is technical, in line with the 'metricisation' of the academy that Burrows sees as central to its marketisation. This, then, is an area that can successfully compete for research income and funded research students, and from the wealthy EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council), and the moderately well off ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council), not just the poverty-stricken Arts and Humanities Research Council. And it can claim 'impact'. It has been given a lot of new posts.



So what are the specific challenges all this posed for me? In trying to define them, I'll divide them into two groups: those posed by and within the institution, and those posed by and within the School.

### **Institutional challenges**

As my opening anecdote suggested, the biggest issue here concerned simply being heard. This has a double aspect. It is a literal problem – how, in a meeting of 'senior management', to be heard in an atmosphere where a speech intervention is a competitive act. But more important, gender is constantly being (re)produced, not merely crudely re-affirmed, in these meetings, and this raises the question of how, or whether, to speak from a position within a discourse to which you are not only politically opposed but which excludes or marginalizes you<sup>4</sup>. Tracking the strategies adopted by women who have occupied similar management positions suggests two radically different approaches. One, which, following Wendy Webster<sup>5</sup>, we might call the Thatcher approach, is to perform masculinity: to speak and act from a position that simply does not acknowledge gender difference - the downside of this approach is that such a manager is also likely to be blind to gender issues in her School. The second, adopted far more consciously and strategically, is to perform, almost ninety years on from Joan Rivière's original article, Rivière's femininity as masquerade<sup>6</sup> (Rivière 1929). A senior colleague has, she tells me, styled her hair and taken to wearing makeup. She makes alliances with her male colleagues over specific issues, and makes sure that one of them always raises the issue first.

I developed a number of tactics. For 'Senior Management' meetings, I too tried to

make tactical alliances, finding male colleagues who would make the interventions before I weighed in. In smaller meetings, where I was usually being held to account, I would be impeccably prepared, with every possible fact in front of me - about student numbers, staff-student ratios, sources of income, resourcing needs - and a series of carefully worked-out plans to propose. I would be relentlessly 'reasonable', but relentless. And I made sure that the School was always in surplus. It was, I suppose, an attempt to create a space in which gender, however visible (I was always the *only* woman in this position) was *not* being actively performed, and gendered categories resisted.

### **The School**

Here I was in charge. I had to make the School work internally, and I had to increase its standing in an atmosphere of internal competition in which 'failure to thrive' would mean disappearance. When the School was formed, we were the second smallest School in the university. So I sought:

- To grow student numbers. Nothing else could change if we remained precarious.
- To grow staffing as a direct consequence of student growth. And to introduce EO commitment principles and questions for all appointments.
- To gain a new status, and a career structure, for teaching-only staff. And to introduce women technicians. And to get more women promoted to professor.
- To get as many people (and as many women) as possible on to externally prestigious committees (research councils, national and international

subject associations).

- To establish a School Management Group that was representative in terms of both subject area (film studies, media studies, media practice etc) and of gender<sup>7</sup> ...
- And in an atmosphere of expansion to develop a mix of subject areas and degree programmes that would include, and combine, the theoretical, the critical, the practical, and the applied; I tried to ensure that staffing in *all* areas was gender-mixed, and that 'feminised' tasks were undertaken by men as well as women; and that the curriculum (and pedagogy) in each area was attentive to issues of equality and diversity.

It was a strategy of balance. We *had* to grow our 'digital offering', and our film and media production. But as far as possible this should be in a way that challenged their gendered assumptions, and it must not be at the expense of cultural studies or film studies.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, I want to insist that the 'metricisation' and marketization of the university that we have all experienced are also highly gendered processes. So that when I became the only woman Head of School I was an always visible anomaly. The strategies employed to both contest and manage this situation would, in consequence, be equally visible. They would also involve a measure of complicity (I *had* to produce all those figures and plans), and of *duplicity* (my plans did not give my real reasons for retaining MA Gender and Media, or trying to grow Cultural Studies). Whatever successes I achieved, they

would be precarious, and as a manager I would be blind to my own areas of failure. They would also not be enough – I am very aware of Rosalind Gill's (2010) critique of the affective damage the neoliberal university inflicts, particularly on its most feminised workers, and the ways in which this is kept 'secret and silenced'. But they *might* perhaps create a space where different values could be not only taught (by all those less-than-ideal academics) but also, for a time at least, lived.

**(3002 words)**

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of this argument, see Margaret Thornton, 'The Mirage of Merit' (2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Sue Thornham 2013 for further discussion of this issue. For a comprehensive overview of how gender and power interact with leadership in contemporary higher education, see Morley 2013.

<sup>3</sup> For a longer discussion of this narrative, see my *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies* (2001).

<sup>4</sup> It is a dilemma that Judith Butler characterizes as that of Antigone, who becomes an ambiguous and compromised representative of feminism. In speaking out in opposition to state power, Antigone finds that she can assert herself only through adopting a discourse which 'embod[ies] the norms of the power she opposes' (2000S: 10-11).

<sup>5</sup> See Webster, *Not a Man to Match Her* (1990).

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<sup>6</sup> Rivière describes ‘a clever woman, ... a University lecturer in an abstruse subject which seldom attracts women’, who deflects the hostility of her male colleagues at her ‘theft’ of ‘masculinity’ by performing ‘womanliness as a masquerade’: adopting ‘particularly feminine clothes’ and modes of behaviour (1929: 308).

<sup>7</sup> Although gender is my particular focus in this article, the group sought to be representative in other ways, too. Louise Morley suggests the ideal in this respect. ‘Feminist leadership’, she argues, ‘is characterised by a commitment to social equity and change and awareness of gender issues and intersections with other structures of inequality’. She adds that such leadership also ‘attempts to challenge unequal distributions and exercise of power, hierarchical structures and decision-making processes and discriminatory institutional practices.’ (2013: 126). Achieving this, however, remains frustratingly difficult.

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